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HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL COOPERATION BETWEEN UZBEKISTAN AND THE PERSIAN GULF STATES

Abstract

This article examines the formation and development of social cooperation between the Gulf Arab states and the Republic of Uzbekistan in the context of post-Cold War geopolitical transformations. The study analyzes how the 1990–1991 Gulf War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union reshaped regional and global political dynamics, creating new conditions for bilateral interaction. Particular attention is paid to the role of Islam, cultural affinity, and shared civilizational values as foundational elements in the establishment of early diplomatic and social ties. The research highlights the strategic importance of social cooperation in education, healthcare, humanitarian assistance, and infrastructure development. Special focus is given to the activities of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait, as well as the institutional role of development funds in implementing socially significant projects in Uzbekistan. The findings demonstrate that despite political and security challenges, social cooperation has become a sustainable and long-term component of bilateral relations, contributing to regional stability and human capital development.

Keywords: Gulf states; Uzbekistan; social cooperation; soft power; education; healthcare; infrastructure

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ЎЗБЕКСТАН МЕН ПАРСЫ ШЫҒАНАҒЫ МЕМЛЕКЕТТЕРІ АРАСЫНДАҒЫ ӘЛЕУМЕТТІК ЫНТЫМАҚТАСТЫҚТЫҢ ТАРИХИ ДАМУЫ

Аңдатпа

Бұл мақалада Парсы шығанағы араб мемлекеттері мен Өзбекстан Республикасы арасындағы әлеуметтік ынтымақтастықтың қалыптасуы мен дамуы 1990-жылдардағы жаһандық және аймақтық трансформациялар аясында талданады. 1990–1991 жылдардағы Парсы шығанағы соғысы өңірлік қауіпсіздік жүйесін шайқалтып, монархиялық мемлекеттерді ішкі тұрақтылықты сақтауға және жаңа даму стратегияларын іздеуге мәжбүр етті. Кеңес Одағының ыдырауы Орталық Азияда тәуелсіз мемлекеттердің пайда болуына әкеліп, Өзбекстанды халықаралық қатынастар жүйесіне енгізу міндетін алға қойды. Зерттеу исламдық ортақтық, мәдени жақындық және «жұмсақ күш» тетіктері арқылы білім беру, денсаулық сақтау, гуманитарлық көмек және инфрақұрылым салаларындағы жобалардың маңызын көрсетеді. Саудиялық Даму қоры, Кувейт қоры және БАӘ бастамалары сияқты институттардың рөлі салыстырмалы түрде бағаланады. Дереккөздер ретінде архив материалдары, ресми келісімдер, статистика және көптілді ғылыми әдебиет пайдаланылды. Нәтижелер әлеуметтік ынтымақтастықтың саяси және қауіпсіздік шектеулеріне қарамастан

ұзақ мерзімді сенім қалыптастырып, адами капиталды нығайтуға ықпал еткенін дәлелдейді. Сонымен бірге, ынтымақтастық діни байланыстармен қатар қауіпсіздікке қатысты алаңдаушылықтармен тоғысты: радикалды ағымдардың белсенуі тараптардың өзара әрекетін сақтықпен жүргізуге итермеледі, алайда әлеуметтік жобалар диалогты үзбей сақтап қалды. Бұл тұрақты институционалдық негіз қалыптастыруға мүмкіндік берді.

Түйін сөздер: Шығанақ мемлекеттері; Өзбекстан; әлеуметтік ынтымақтастық; жұмсақ күш; білім беру; денсаулық сақтау; инфрақұрылым

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ИСТОРИЧЕСКОЕ РАЗВИТИЕ СОЦИАЛЬНОГО СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВА МЕЖДУ УЗБЕКИСТАНОМ И ГОСУДАРСТВАМИ ПЕРСИДСКОГО ЗАЛИВА

Аннотация

В статье анализируется становление и развитие социального сотрудничества между арабскими государствами Персидского залива и Республикой Узбекистан в условиях глубоких геополитических преобразований конца XX века. Рассматривается влияние войны в Персидском заливе 1990–1991 годов и распада Советского Союза на формирование новой региональной и глобальной системы международных отношений. Особое внимание уделяется роли религиозного фактора, культурной и цивилизационной близости, которые способствовали установлению дипломатических и гуманитарных контактов на начальном этапе взаимодействия. Исследование раскрывает значение сотрудничества в сферах образования, здравоохранения, инфраструктурного развития и гуманитарной поддержки. Проанализирована деятельность Саудовской Аравии, Объединённых Арабских Эмиратов и Кувейта, а также роль их национальных фондов развития в реализации социальных проектов в Узбекистане. Делается вывод о том, что социальное сотрудничество стало устойчивым направлением двусторонних отношений, способствующим модернизации социальной инфраструктуры, укреплению региональной стабильности и развитию человеческого потенциала в долгосрочной перспективе. Кроме того, работа опирается на широкий круг источников, включая официальные документы, статистические данные, архивные материалы и научные публикации, что обеспечивает объективность и достоверность полученных выводов и усиливает аналитическую ценность проведённого исследования.

Ключевые слова: государства залива; Узбекистан; социальное сотрудничество; мягкая сила; образование; здравоохранение; инфраструктура

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ÖZBEKİSTAN İLE BASRA KÖRFEZİ DEVLETLERİ ARASINDAKİ SOSYAL İŞ BİRLİĞİNİN TARİHİ GELİŞİMİ

Özet

Bu makalede, Basra Körfezi Arap devletleri ile Özbekistan Cumhuriyeti arasındaki sosyal iş birliğinin oluşumu ve gelişimi, 1990'lı yıllardaki küresel ve bölgesel dönüşümler bağlamında analiz edilmektedir. 1990-1991 yıllarındaki Körfez Savaşı, bölgesel güvenlik sistemini sarsmış ve monarşik devletleri iç istikrarı korumaya ve yeni gelişim stratejileri aramaya zorlamıştır. Sovyetler

Birliđi'nin dađılması, Orta Asya'da bađımsız devletlerin ortaya ıkmasını sađlamıř ve zbekistan'ın uluslararası iliřkiler sistemine dâhil edilmesi gerekliliđini gündeme getirmiřtir.

Arařtırma; İslami ortaklık, kltrel yakınlık ve “yumuřak g” mekanizmaları aracılıđıyla eđitim, sađlık, insani yardım ve altyapı alanlarındaki projelerin nemini ortaya koymaktadır. Suudi Kalkınma Fonu, Kuveyt Fonu ve BAE (Birleřik Arap Emirlikleri) giriřimleri gibi kurumların rol karřılařtırmalı olarak deđerlendirilmektedir.

Kaynak olarak arřiv materyalleri, resm anlařmalar, istatistikler ve ok dilli bilimsel literatr kullanılmıřtır. Elde edilen bulgular, sosyal iř birliđinin siyas ve gvenlik sınırlamalarına rađmen uzun vadeli gven tesis ettiđini ve beřer sermayenin glendirilmesine katkı sađladığını gstermektedir.

Bununla birlikte, iř birliđi din bađlarla birlikte gvenliđe iliřkin kaygularla da kesiřmiřtir. Radikal akımların etkinleřmesi, tarafların etkileřimini temkinli yrtmeye sevk etmiř ancak sosyal projeler diyalogun kesintiye uđramadan srdrlmesini sađlamıřtır. Bu durum, istikrarlı bir kurumsal temel oluřturulmasına imkân tanımıřtır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Krfez Devletleri; zbekistan; Sosyal İř Birliđi; Yumuřak G; Eđitim; Sađlık; Altyapı.

Introduction. The 1990s of the twentieth century were marked by profound transformations in the global political system and characterized by complex processes at both regional and global levels. During this period, the two regions analyzed in this article—the Gulf Arab states and Central Asia—were confronted with the necessity of redefining their development trajectories. Although these processes initially manifested at the regional level, they soon became closely intertwined with issues of global significance.

The 1990–1991 Gulf War had serious political, economic, and social consequences for the Gulf Arab states. The military conflict disrupted the regional security system and posed urgent challenges for the states, including ensuring peace, maintaining internal stability, and developing new strategies for socio-economic development. In particular, strengthening regional security and ensuring socio-political stability became one of the top priorities for the monarchical states that are members of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Parallel to these developments, the collapse of the Soviet Union led to the emergence of new independent states within the international relations system. Among them was the Republic of Uzbekistan, whose government faced complex tasks such as preserving state independence, establishing political institutions, and creating the foundations for socio-economic development. Under the new geopolitical conditions, establishing foreign relations and integrating into the international community became one of the key directions of Uzbekistan's foreign policy.

Thus, despite the regional and global challenges of the 1990s, the Gulf Arab states and the Republic of Uzbekistan paid particular attention to the formation of mutual cooperation. From the very first years of Uzbekistan's independence, relations between the two regions began to develop on the basis of shared economic and social interests. It was within this historical context that social cooperation emerged as an important component of bilateral relations, creating a solid foundation for its further development in subsequent periods.

Methodology. This study is grounded in the principles of historical research and employs a multidisciplinary methodological approach to analyze the development of social cooperation between the Gulf Arab states and the Republic of Uzbekistan. The research methodology is based on a synthesis of classical historical methods and modern analytical tools, enabling a comprehensive examination of the subject within both regional and global contexts.

The historical-chronological method is applied to identify the stages of formation and development of social cooperation from the early 1990s onward. This approach allows for the identification of key phases, turning points, and continuity in bilateral relations, particularly in the context of post–Cold War geopolitical transformations and the processes of state-building in Uzbekistan.

The historical-comparative method is used to analyze similarities and differences in the approaches of the Gulf Arab states and Uzbekistan toward social development and cooperation. Through comparative analysis, the study highlights how differing political systems, economic models, and social structures have influenced the scope and substance of bilateral cooperation.

In addition, a historical-systemic approach is employed to examine social cooperation as an integral component of the international relations system. This method makes it possible to analyze the interconnection of political, economic, and social factors, as well as the impact of regional and global processes on cooperation between the two regions.

The problem-oriented approach is applied to identify key challenges and priority tasks that emerged at various stages of social cooperation. This approach is particularly useful in assessing the responses of both sides to regional instability, security threats, and socio-economic transformations in the aftermath of the Gulf War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The source base of the study relies on a wide range of primary and secondary sources. These include official government documents, bilateral agreements, archival materials, political statements, statistical data, as well as academic monographs and scholarly articles in Uzbek, Arabic, Russian, and English. All sources were subjected to critical analysis to ensure the objectivity, reliability, and historical accuracy of the research.

Overall, this methodological framework provides a balanced and historically grounded analysis of social cooperation between the Gulf Arab states and Uzbekistan, contributing to a deeper understanding of the long-term dynamics and historical significance of bilateral relations.

Results. In the system of international relations, social cooperation—particularly cultural and humanitarian interaction—occupies a distinct place as an essential component of interstate cooperation. This dimension not only complements official diplomatic relations between states but also contributes to strengthening mutual trust, understanding, and closeness among peoples [1, 267]. Social and humanitarian cooperation serves as one of the key mechanisms of public diplomacy, fostering direct communication between societies through culture, education, and humanitarian exchanges. In this respect, it represents an important instrument in international relations that relies on the human factor and ensures sustainable and long-term cooperation. Consequently, social cooperation has become a vital link in contemporary interstate relations, increasingly recognized as “one of the most effective instruments of foreign policy” [2, 5].

The findings of the study indicate that amid the profound geopolitical transformations of the early 1990s, social cooperation between the Gulf Arab states and the Republic of Uzbekistan emerged as one of the priority and strategic directions of bilateral relations. Despite complex regional and global political processes, both sides viewed social cooperation as an important tool for ensuring societal stability during periods of political and economic transformation, as well as for strengthening mutual trust.

In particular, during the process of the emergence of new independent states in Central Asia, the Gulf Arab states were among the first to recognize their sovereignty. In establishing initial diplomatic and social ties, shared cultural values, religious commonality, and ideas of solidarity within the Muslim ummah played a significant role. With the disappearance of ideological barriers inherent in the bipolar international system, historical-cultural heritage and religious factors came to serve as important institutional and moral foundations for the development of bilateral social cooperation [3, 34].

Islam played a crucial unifying role in the formation of relations between the Gulf Arab states and Uzbekistan. Religious commonality created favorable conditions for the establishment of bilateral relations during the early years of independence and subsequently stimulated the expansion of cooperation. Member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) regarded the independence of the former Soviet republics of Central Asia—whose populations are predominantly Muslim and part of the global Muslim community—as a moral and civilizational responsibility. This approach facilitated the use of religious factors as a means of legitimizing political relations [4, 160]. The leadership of the Gulf Arab states closely monitored the state-building processes taking place in the

former Soviet republics with predominantly Muslim populations. This perspective, rooted in civilizational and cultural proximity, became an important factor in shaping the foreign policy priorities of the Gulf states [5].

However, these political and economic interests came into tension with the secular development model and security-oriented foreign policies of the Central Asian states. Newly independent republics encountered the activities of radical religious movements, including groups such as *Al-Qaeda* and *Hizb ut-Tahrir*. These movements sought to alter state authority and posed serious threats to national security. The leadership of Uzbekistan openly acknowledged these threats and identified them as a priority in ensuring national security [6, 244]. Thus, while religious affinity facilitated dialogue, security concerns and the presence of radical movements complicated cooperation with the Gulf Arab states. Consequently, although religious commonality in the sphere of social cooperation contributed to the promotion of bilateral ties, the existence of security challenges and radical movements increased the complexity of cooperation. In the post-1990 period, social cooperation—particularly through “soft power” strategies—between the Gulf Arab states and Uzbekistan created certain opportunities for advancing relations, yet simultaneously encountered a range of political, cultural, and security constraints.

Discussion. Analytical findings indicate that social cooperation between the Gulf Arab states and Uzbekistan began to take shape in the early years following 1990. The fundamental basis of these relations was Islam, which strengthened cultural and religious affinity and created a strategic platform for dialogue between the Gulf states and Uzbekistan. The “soft power” mechanism functioned as an instrument for operationalizing Islamic commonality and advancing bilateral ties. Thus, while religious affinity stimulated cooperation, it simultaneously operated alongside political and security constraints. Nevertheless, social cooperation between the “Arab Six” and Uzbekistan developed in a systematic and consistent manner.

At the initial stage, this section examined the concept of the social sphere from a research perspective and clarified its conceptual foundations. On this basis, the Gulf Arab states actively sought to develop social cooperation with Uzbekistan. The research findings demonstrate that these initiatives not only reinforced religious and cultural closeness but also encompassed education, culture, academic exchange, and broader social development. A country-specific analysis shows that the Gulf Arab states displayed significant engagement in creating a social dialogue platform with Uzbekistan, serving to strengthen religious commonality and promote cultural diplomacy. At the same time, political and security constraints affected the effectiveness of cooperation, highlighting the complex and dual nature of these relations.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, while striving for leadership in the Gulf region, has also sought to assert leadership within the broader Arab world. This foreign policy strategy manifested in the early 1990s through Saudi Arabia’s efforts to play a leading role in establishing cooperation with the newly independent Central Asian republics, particularly the Republic of Uzbekistan. As a practical expression of this policy, members of the Saudi royal family undertook official visits to Central Asian republics in 1992. In the same year, Saudi Arabia provided Uzbekistan with economic assistance that included 800,000 tons of wheat [7]. This assistance was of particular significance for Uzbekistan, where ensuring food security and achieving grain self-sufficiency were pressing issues during the early years of independence.

At the same time, this economic assistance and high-level visits served as an important initial stage in the formation of social and humanitarian cooperation between the two regions. Saudi Arabia’s early support and political initiatives laid an institutional foundation for subsequent cooperation in cultural, religious, and educational fields. One of the key areas of social cooperation was education. According to a report by the Committee on Religious Affairs under the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 12 Uzbek students studied at higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia in 1995 through the Committee’s channels [8]. This can be regarded as one of the first practical outcomes of religious and educational cooperation between the two states.

An important institutional actor implementing Saudi Arabia's "soft power" strategy in foreign policy is the Saudi Fund for Development (SFD). The Fund has played a notable role in financing socially significant projects in Uzbekistan. In particular, projects aimed at developing educational infrastructure in Uzbekistan have had substantial social importance. Within the framework of a school rehabilitation and reconstruction project, as of November 17, 2009, 16 out of the 20 planned general secondary schools had been completed using SFD resources [9]. These schools had the capacity to accommodate a total of 4,743 students, significantly expanding access to educational services in the regions. These projects were financed through concessional loans provided by the Saudi Fund for Development to the Government of Uzbekistan.

Saudi Arabia's social projects in Uzbekistan were not limited to the education sector. Fund resources were also actively utilized in other areas of social infrastructure aimed at improving the quality of life of the population. In particular, priority areas such as access to clean drinking water and the development of transport and communication systems occupied an important place in Saudi Arabia's social cooperation policy.

Notably, in 2009, within the framework of the "National Highway of the Republic of Uzbekistan" project, the Saudi Fund for Development allocated USD 100 million to finance a 53-kilometer section of the 4R87 highway along the Guzor–Chim–Kokdala route of the Samarkand–Guzor motorway, covering the 0–18 km and 38–73 km segments [9, 41]. This project contributed to accelerating the socio-economic development of the regions through the modernization of transport infrastructure.

As of January 2026, the Saudi Fund for Development was implementing 11 active initiatives in Uzbekistan with a total value of USD 287.4 million [10]. These projects not only ensure financial inflows but also contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in reducing poverty and improving living standards. In this regard, cooperation with the SFD holds significant institutional importance within Uzbekistan's long-term development strategy.

Among the Gulf Arab states, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) pursues a distinctive development model and foreign policy approach, which is also reflected in its social cooperation with Uzbekistan. Like other Arab monarchies, the UAE has sought to foster a stable, market-oriented cooperation environment in Central Asia by financing projects aimed at improving social conditions in Uzbekistan. These initiatives have been implemented consistently since the early years of Central Asian independence.

Since 1995, academic cooperation has been established between the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan and the Juma Al-Masjid Scientific Center in Dubai. Within this framework, the historical and cultural ties between Arab and Asian civilizations in Central Asia and the territories of the Arab Caliphate during the medieval period, as well as their role in civilizational development, have been studied [11]. This academic cooperation has contributed not only to scholarly exchange but also to strengthening cultural and humanitarian ties between the two regions.

Humanitarian assistance initiatives by the UAE constitute another important dimension of practical cooperation. In August 2005, the UAE Minister of Interior, Sheikh Saif bin Zayed Al Nahyan, donated special-purpose vehicles (Chevrolet Niva and UAZ-315123-011 models) valued at USD 26,125 to the State Committee for Nature Protection of the Republic of Uzbekistan [12]. This technical assistance enhanced the material and technical capacity of environmental monitoring and conservation activities.

In addition, to support socially vulnerable groups, the UAE allocated USD 34,142 to continue renovation work at an orphanage in Bukhara region [12, 82]. These initiatives reflect the UAE's tangible contribution to Uzbekistan's social policy and have strengthened humanitarian cooperation between the two states.

From 2017 onward, social cooperation between the UAE and Uzbekistan entered a qualitatively new stage. This development was closely linked to systemic reforms in Uzbekistan's foreign policy following a change in political leadership, which significantly expanded the

country's openness to international cooperation. Within the framework of the new foreign policy concept, deepening relations with the Gulf Arab states, including the UAE, was identified as a priority.

At the same time, the UAE's global development strategy—aimed at expanding multifaceted cooperation with new regions—also stimulated the intensification of bilateral relations. The UAE began to consistently promote its economic and financial potential through social and humanitarian projects and to strengthen strategic partnerships using “soft power” tools in Central Asia, particularly in Uzbekistan. During the period under review, the UAE has implemented several important projects in Uzbekistan in the fields of education, healthcare, and social infrastructure development. Healthcare cooperation, in particular, has emerged as a key component of bilateral social relations.

One notable project in this area involves equipping medical institutions in districts of Fergana region with modern diagnostic equipment, implemented in cooperation with the UAE-based company Ittihad International Investment. In the first phase, multislice computed tomography (MSCT) scanners were delivered to 14 district medical associations in Fergana region. In the second phase, the total number of such devices is planned to reach 100 units. The initial phase of this initiative, scheduled for 2025–2026, is estimated to be financed at approximately USD 70 million and is being carried out through cooperation between the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Uzbekistan and UAE private investors [13].

Another major healthcare infrastructure project involves the construction of a modern rehabilitation center near Tashkent. This project is being implemented under a public–private partnership (PPP) model based at the Republican Research Center of Emergency Medical Care under the Ministry of Emergency Situations of Uzbekistan. A contract has been signed with Burjeel Medical City (Abu Dhabi) for the construction and equipping of the center, with a total project value of approximately USD 30 million. This investment aims not only to improve the quality of medical services but also to develop rehabilitation medicine in Uzbekistan and introduce advanced international practices.

The State of Kuwait has also established broad-based cooperation with Central Asian republics, including Uzbekistan, and remains interested in consistently developing these relations. Social cooperation between Kuwait and Uzbekistan dates back to the 1990s. In 1995, a delegation led by Kuwait's Minister of Education, Suleiman Al-Badr, visited Uzbekistan to promote cooperation in education. During the visit, the delegation familiarized itself with educational reforms in Uzbekistan and discussed issues related to expanding academic and educational ties and exchanging experience in human resource development [14].

Social cooperation between Kuwait and Uzbekistan is multifaceted, encompassing not only modern social projects but also initiatives aimed at studying, preserving, and restoring the intellectual and spiritual heritage of prominent Islamic scholars from Central Asia. In this context, Kuwait has provided financial support for the preservation and restoration of sacred sites and historical monuments in Uzbekistan.

In 1998, at the directive of the late Amir of Kuwait, Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, Ahmad Khalid Al-Kulabi allocated USD 500,000 for the renovation and improvement of the Imam al-Bukhari complex in Samarkand [14, 127]. This project represented a practical expression of Kuwait's policy toward preserving Uzbekistan's rich Islamic and spiritual heritage and played a significant role in strengthening cultural and humanitarian cooperation between the two countries.

Like other Gulf Arab states analyzed above, Kuwait primarily implements its social cooperation through the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED). The Fund serves as a key institution supporting projects in education, healthcare, social infrastructure, and humanitarian fields in Uzbekistan. This mechanism demonstrates Kuwait's effective use of economic and social diplomacy instruments in its foreign policy and contributes to the stable and long-term development of bilateral relations.

In particular, KFAED has financed several important projects in Uzbekistan aimed at developing education and religious–educational sectors. These include equipping the Imam al-Bukhari complex in Samarkand and the Hazrati Imam scientific and educational complex in Tashkent with modern facilities, constructing a new building for the International Islamic Academy, and digitizing 50 classrooms in general education institutions. Additionally, major infrastructure projects in healthcare and education have been implemented through KFAED credit funds. Between 1997 and 2024, a total of 10 large-scale projects with a combined value of USD 210 million were realized in these sectors [15]. These projects have played a significant role in modernizing Uzbekistan’s social infrastructure, developing human capital, and strengthening the institutional foundations of social cooperation in Kuwait–Uzbekistan relations.

Conclusion. After the Gulf War, historically established relations between the Arab states of the Gulf and the Central Asian republics, particularly the Republic of Uzbekistan, were restored. While Islam served as the key factor in the revival of these ties, their subsequent development has been shaped by the core strategies and objectives of the countries’ foreign policies. The primary driving force behind cooperation between the two regions has been economic interests. At the same time, cooperation in the social sphere plays a complementary role by reinforcing economic interaction and strengthening mutual trust.

Within the framework of this study, social cooperation between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the State of Kuwait, on the one hand, and the Republic of Uzbekistan, on the other, was analyzed across a wide range of areas. These include education, healthcare, and support for infrastructure projects aimed at improving the living standards of the population. Despite existing political and security constraints, social cooperation has contributed to the modernization of Uzbekistan’s infrastructure, the development of human capital, and the strengthening of cultural and humanitarian exchanges. As a result, these interactions have not only complemented diplomatic channels but have also helped to establish a sustainable platform for cooperation between Central Asia and the Arab states of the Gulf.

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